

STORY BY STAFF SGT. JEREMY LARLEE

# OLD AIRCRAFT NEVER DIE

I spent the first three years of my career busting my knuckles as a crew chief on the C-130 Hercules. My hands have a map of scars to prove it.

So when an assignment came down the pipeline to do a story on the 309th Aerospace Regeneration and Maintenance Group at Davis-Monthan Air Force Base, Ariz., I jumped at it.

I was excited to visit a place I had heard about a lot in my pre-desk-jockey days.

It was an eerie feeling exploring the group's 2,600-acre storage lot where more than 4,400 aircraft of 70 different varieties are out to pasture.

Out there alone, the only sound I heard was the spooky creaking sound of wind-swept aircraft. It didn't seem to be a place I'd like to be at after dark. It would be a swell location to film a horror movie.

While seeing all the old aircraft was great, what stuck in my mind the most was the group's cost-efficient operation. By nature, I am extremely thrifty (some would even say cheap). The group makes

\$7 for every tax dollar that is spent storing, regenerating or disposing of aircraft.

Maintenance crews extract every ounce of military capability from the aircraft parked in the desert lot. Some planes are sealed and maintained in pristine condition in case they need to fly again. Other aircraft are there for cannibalization — keeping Department of Defense aircraft, and those of other nations, flying at home and in the war on terrorism.

It's amazing that aircraft my grandfather's tax dollars bought are still useful today.

Talk about thrifty. The group throws nothing away.

Many people refer to the storage area as the bone yard. Group workers don't like that. Because it's a name that conjures up images of a junkyard. Yes, some planes do go there to die. But before they pass on to that big hangar in the sky, the Air Force uses every single available part that is still functional.

The group does this various

ways, like taking parts off old aircraft to sustain today's warfighters, regenerating aircraft to fly again and selling some of the aircraft and parts to our allies.

The group also doubles the life of the A-10 Thunderbolt II through the service life extension program. You'd think that since the Air Force is adding another 10,000 flight hours to the A-10's life that the group would spare no cost to make that happen. But that isn't the case.

Part of the A-10 life-extending process includes removing and replacing all the bullet-proof foam in its wings. The pre-cut replacement pieces of foam cost more than \$3,500 on the open market. The group couldn't live with that cost. So, they devised a method to buy the foam in bulk and cut the pieces themselves, which lowered the cost to about \$300.

I only wish I could find a 90-percent savings at the clearance racks and outlet stores I patrol.

It's great seeing this type of penny-pinching way of thinking. It also makes me feel that I need to step up my own efforts as a steward of the taxpayers' money — beyond cutting out the lights at the end of the day and recycling my soda cans.

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Photos by Tech. Sgt. Jeffrey Wolfe



There's nothing left but the skeleton of the C-5 Galaxy (above) after workers harvest all the huge transport's parts. The 309th Aerospace Regeneration and Maintenance Group stores more than 4,400 aircraft and other equipment at its desert yard (right).

